

Before the dinosaurs, this sea creature was one of Earth's biggest animals

By Los Angeles, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.16.15

Word Count **556**



Pictured is an 8.2-foot fossil of the arthropod, *Jaekelopterus rhenaniae*. The newly discovered *Aegirocassis benmoulae* could grow up to 7 feet. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Scientists found the remains of a giant sea creature.

Its name is *Aegirocassis benmoulae*. The creature lived about 480 million years ago. It swam in a shallow sea that is now the Sahara Desert in Africa. It grew up to 7 feet long. At the time, it was one of the largest creatures on Earth.

Scientists say the *Aegirocassis benmoulae* is an early member of the arthropod family. Arthropods are animals with skeletons outside of their bodies, like shells. Modern arthropods include lobsters, cockroaches and butterflies. The sea creature was their ancient ancestor.

Ate Like A Whale

"It is one of the biggest arthropods that ever existed, far bigger than any arthropod today," said Peter Van Roy. He is a paleontologist at Yale University who helped find the sea creature. Paleontologists study fossils of ancient creatures. They want to see how they changed over time. A fossil can be an old bone or a shell. It can even be an imprint of an animal on a rock.

A report describing the sea creature was published Wednesday in Nature magazine.

Most of the major groups of animals appeared on Earth about the same time. This sea creature lived far earlier than the first dinosaurs. It was the largest animal of its time. It died out long ago.

The sea creature belonged to a group of animals that had flat bodies and lived in water. All of them had two growths in the front of their mouths. They were mostly used to grab prey, like worms. However, the newly discovered sea creature looked differently. In front of its mouth, it had a net of spikes. The creature used the spikes to catch tiny sea animals called plankton. It ate like a whale.

"We Found So Many"

The sea creature seems to have been fairly common. It was named in honor of Moroccan fossil collector Mohamed Ben Moula, who found it in Morocco with Van Roy. Morocco is a country in North Africa. The two scientists found dozens of the fossils in the Moroccan desert.

"It is interesting we found so many of them," Van Roy said.

Arthropods first showed up about 530 million years ago. Today, arthropods include the largest number of different animals on the planet. There are so many of them because they can live in so many different kinds of environments.

However, early arthropod fossils are hard to find. That makes this find so exciting for scientists.

Most fossils are the remains of the hard parts of an animal, like shells and bone, explained John Paterson. He teaches at the University of New England in Australia.

Getting A Clue

The sea creature fossils are from the soft part of the animal. Finding this is very rare. Usually scientists find shell or bone fossils.

The sea creature fossils are in very good condition. They were preserved in mud that flowed into the bottom of the sea. The mud turned the sea creature to stone.

This helped scientists solve an old mystery.

Today, the legs of most arthropods have two parts. Scientists have wondered how they got that way. The sea creature fossils have given them a clue.

Van Roy said they found many fossils in the Moroccan desert.

"We have something like 5,000 or 6,000 specimens," he said. Most of them have not been studied yet.